

# *Day Zero*

*A Dissertation on Isolation*



*Russ Paton*

*Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.*

*-Lynn Ungar, *Pandemic**

## Introduction

*March 11, 2020*

*Day Zero* sounds like an ominous choice for the title of a narrative concerning the Corona Virus, but I am not counting backwards to Armageddon, quite the contrary. Today is the start of a grand adventure, and I am delighted you can accompany me.

The World Health Organization officially declared Corona Virus a pandemic today, so I am referring to this as day “0”. We are encouraged to practice social distancing and to self-isolate to avoid the spread of the virus for the foreseeable future. I intend to record the “terrifying and beautiful” events of a life in isolation from a personal perspective, numbering each day from now until this plague ends.

I have no idea who will read these scribbles, but I am happy to be sharing the journey with you.

Russ Paton

FOR THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW ME, A LITTLE BACKGROUND:

Russ Paton: Occupant of planet Earth for 65 years. I live with my wife Terri (“Bear”) on an acreage in southern Alberta.

Isolation isn't foreign to us – we live a long way out in the sticks. We have a house and a barn, but no critters (other than one self-absorbed cat, Furry Gus McFuzzywuz “Furgus”).

Our four kids have all flown the coop and paired themselves with wonderful people. We keep in close contact, but parenting has become a spectator sport for us.

I am  $\frac{3}{4}$  retired so I don't need to commute. We love to travel but our wings are clipped for the time being.

I am predisposed to introversion so subjecting myself to a long staycation shouldn't be a big deal – I hope. Bear is comfortable with her own company and, after 34 years together, we have pretty much figured each other out.

We are well supplied with food and necessities. There is a little town 20 km away that has most of the basics, provided the infrastructure holds.

So, there you have it. Let's see how a life in isolation unfolds, starting on .....

.....Day One

# A Splinter

Thursday March 12, 2020 – Day 1

My observations on the first day of isolation concern the urgent, almost overpowering need to hoard goods in a pandemic. Storing medicine, food and consumable materials in



a crisis is a Darwinian instinct – it could mean survival in a prolonged shut-down.

What I hadn't anticipated is that the #1 item to fall from the shelves is toilet paper! Rice, beans, canned goods I expected, but it hadn't occurred to me that Charmin would be the *golden* commodity.

I am not sure what toilet paper hoarding says about human nature

– mankind was without the product for most of our history; how did it rise to the top of the necessity list?

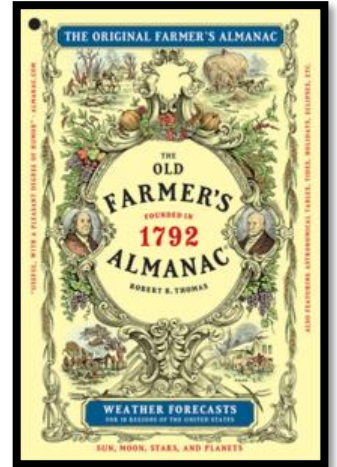
I turned to *The History Guy* for answers. Here is what he had to say:

- In ancient Greece, when citizens wished to banish certain members of society, they would scratch the name of the person to be exiled on broken pieces of pottery called *osstrakon* and cast the pieces as votes. The word “ostracism” arose from this practice. But it didn't end there, the broken pottery pieces with the ostracized person's name on them were taken to the toilet and used to scrape the senator's backsides!

- In England, from the 15th century right up until the 20th, the king had a servant called the “*Groom of the Stool*” who was responsible for attending to the king's “post-partum” needs. (“Stool” refers to the commode chair, not the objects deposited in it.) It is unclear whether the groom actually provided a wiping service, or simply made sure that there were linen articles available for the king's use. While *Groom of the Stool* would seem to be an ignoble, even demeaning title, it was a highly sought-after position - no one in the king's court was able to spend as much intimate time with the monarch. The

*Groom of the Stool* was sought out as an advocate for politicians in need of the King's attention.

- In America, industrial newspaper production escalated at the end of the eighteenth century thereby providing both reading and cleaning material (to replace straw and corn cobs). The *Sears and Roebuck* catalogue and the *Old Farmer's Almanac* became fixtures in privies of the time. The hole in the top left corner of the Almanac is designed to allow the magazine to be hung on a hook in the outhouse. It remains there to this day.



- Rolled, perforated toilet paper is a relatively recent invention. It first became a fixture in upscale hotels in the 1820's, as plumbing moved indoors, but never came into common household use until the end of the 19th century. As late as 1935 the production of toilet paper was still evolving. One company of the day advertised its paper as "Splinter Free".

We survived without soft, rolled toilet paper for centuries so I say to all the toilet paper hoarders out there –

**I hope you get a splinter!**



# Steady as a Rock

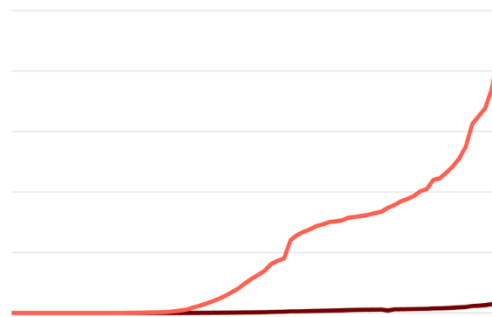
## Friday March 13 – Day 2

I spent the early part of Day 2 catching up on the news. It didn't take long; every article and newscast today is centred on the progress and effects of the Covid 19 virus. There was very little in the sports or entertainment sections as those events have all been cancelled, and any articles that don't involve the pandemic seem superficial and out of touch.

In the financial section there was a stock market graph that displayed some disturbing similarities to the cliff face of Superstition Mountain.



I skipped over that article; it is only money after all. The most disturbing image in the news was the worldwide growth chart of the Corona virus. That graph looks a lot like a rocket misfire – a wobbly upward trend, with an unpredictable future.



Covid 19 Reported Cases - December to March

I can only digest global doom and gloom for so long, so I flipped to a local TV channel. They were running the same stories as the international press, with a local flavour.

The last piece I watched was a Global TV interview with a shopkeeper in Banff. The town is closed to tourists, so businesses are suffering. The reporter asked the retailer how she was coping. I thought her answer was the best news of the day:

“It’s a setback but this virus will pass. We will recover -

**the mountains will always be here”.**





# OMG, it's so Cute!

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**Saturday March 14 and Sunday March 15 – Day 3 & 4**

Nephew Tyler and his family were out for a visit a few weeks ago. It has been a while since we had toddlers around the house so there is not much in the way of toys or creative materials at our place. We picked up some crayons and colouring books, but my paternal instincts determined that our pint-sized guests would benefit from a table and chairs their own size.

I downloaded some plans from the internet, bought a sheet of plywood and determined to build a table and chair set for our guests to use when they visited. Other priorities got in the way and the table never got built before their visit.

But then, along came the pandemic and self-isolation and I no longer had an excuse for an incomplete project. I spent days 3 and 4 finishing this little play station. If the virus continues it might even get paint.

Bear's reaction made it all worthwhile...

**...OMG, It's so Cute!**



The table in this 1958 photograph was built by my uncle Gilbert Becker. My brother Brad and I spent many enjoyable hours playing and dining at the hand-crafted table with matching chairs (in our stylish smoking jackets).

**That's Uncle Russ on the right.**

# A Hard-Ass

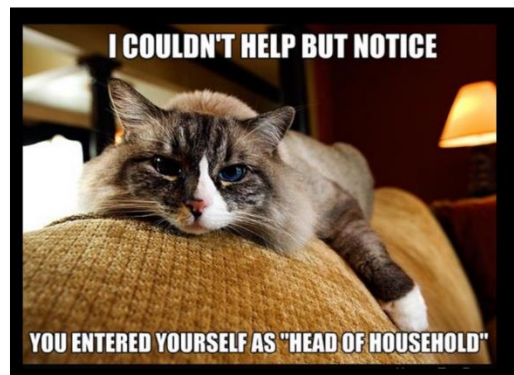
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## Monday March 16 – Day 5

I am not sure which I dislike most, the Corona virus or the tax man. Today I dealt with both at the same time.

I spent the morning of Day 5 in isolation on a conference call with my accountant and CA discussing tax matters. When we got off the phone I turned on CBC Radio just in time to hear the Chief Tax Man himself tell Canadians that the government of Canada has approved a massive relief package for citizens who can't afford food or rent during these troubled times.

I don't have an issue with helping less fortunate Canadians but having just been assessed a whopping tax bill I think I deserve to have some input on who should qualify for that relief. If I were asked, I would establish a few exemptions to the financial relief program. Anyone who falls into any of the following categories should not be eligible for government assistance:



- Anybody who has never bothered to open a savings account or attempted to save for a rainy day.
- Anybody who has been to Las Vegas or a local casino, or squandered money on lottery tickets.
- Anybody who regularly spends more than \$3 for coffee.
- Anybody who has ever owned a car manufactured in Germany.
- Anybody who has holidayed more than 200 miles from home.
- Anybody who has spent an inordinate portion of their income on drugs or alcohol.

I could come up with dozens more but implementing just these few limitations would eliminate a great many people who feel entitled to apply for the relief package PM Trudeau has offered Canadians.

I am in the process of withdrawing a significant sum from my savings account today to send to Mr. Trudeau, who intends to redistribute it to my fellow Canadians. I am not happy about it.

**Call me a hard-ass today, I dare you!**

# A Flickering Patio Lantern

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Tuesday March 17 – Day 6

Bear and I met on St. Patrick's Day, 34 years ago today! We have experienced the bumps and bruises of raising four kids and building a business together and there is still nobody I would rather be cooped up with during a pandemic!

We usually mark the occasion by going on a date of some kind, but this year is different. Most of the venues and restaurants are closed and people are being warned to stay two arms-length away from one another. Not very romantic!

We were determined not to skip the occasion, so we prepared that most Irish cuisine – Manicotti, with iceberg lettuce salad (it's green) and blue cheese dressing, and we dined in the glow of...

.... a flickering patio lantern.



# A Satisfying Whoosh

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Wednesday March 18 – Day 7

The furnace in the barn was out this morning. The temperature outside hovered at -25 and the inside of the building was rapidly descending to match it when I wandered down there after breakfast.

I had planned on cleaning up the mess from my recent woodworking project but getting a fire going in the furnace became the top priority of the day. I dug into the bowels of the furnace and determined that the most likely culprit was a faulty thermo-coupler. There is a lot of stuff in my shop but a replacement thermo gas valve activator isn't something I carry in stock. The barn and everything in it would be frozen solid if I waited for a plumber or ordered one from Amazon.

I decided to break my self-imposed isolation and go to Rona. I am not going to hug anybody at the hardware store, I reasoned!

On the drive to Black Diamond I daydreamed about what life might be like if this Corona Virus turns into an apocalyptic event. What would happen if the entire world shut down to avoid contracting the virus? The medical system would be overwhelmed, food supply chains could be disrupted, communication and infrastructure might grind to a halt. Would we survive such an event?

I had the great good fortune to grow up on a struggling mixed farm on the Canadian prairies in the 1950's through 1970's. I never directly experienced the hardship that my parents and grandparents did during the Great Depression but the lessons they learned during those desperate times were passed down to me. I watched Dad fix a broken water pump at the windmill, in February, at minus 30, with the wind blowing. Mom planted an acre of garden and preserved everything she grew in jars. You don't forget those things.

The local hardware had a replacement thermo-coupler – similar, but not an exact match to the one I need. I tried to think what Dad might do in this situation and I was able to modify the part with his subliminal guidance.



Others might not be so lucky, but we will survive I reasoned, as the furnace ignited with....

... a satisfying *whoosh*.

# A Back Seat to Altruism

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Thursday March 19 – Day 8

Hi Rusty! I just wanted to say a quick Hi to you and mama bear and check in to see how you're both doing. I hope you're both safe. Take good care of each other!! 🌻

Today was probably the most social day I have had in years. There is something about this pandemic and mandated “social distancing” that is bringing out the very best in people.

I had texts (like the one above), phone calls and e-mail from a dozen people all wishing us well and saying the nicest things. Neighbours checked in to see if we needed supplies, friends called for chats, family texts flew back and forth so many times my thumbs grew calluses.

The messages were universal; *“we are in this together, if anybody is falling through the cracks we are here to help, it can't last forever but, even if it lasts a long time, we will be stronger for it.”*

It could be just my imagination, but even politicians seemed less annoying today. Partisanship has, at long last, taken....

..... a back seat to altruism.

## Speaking of putting the common cause ahead of self.....

When we were in Arizona last week, we visited the *Pima Air and Space Museum* in Tucson. There are hundreds of military and civilian aircraft on display and each has a fascinating story to tell. Most of the airplanes and their stories are, unsurprisingly, American.

The plane on the right is not. It is a Japanese Tsurugi, like the ones used by kamikaze pilots in the Pacific during WWII.



I was fascinated with the story of the aircraft, but even more interested in the pilots who flew them.

As we wandered around the Tsurugi I was astounded by its simplicity. The aircraft was meant to fly just once. There is no paint or any markings on the airframe, other than a red *rising sun* dot on the bottom of each wing. The cockpit is sparse – only the most basic flight instruments and no creature comforts. I looked at the landing gear because it appeared to me to be fixed gear (as opposed to retractable) which makes no sense on a military aircraft. Upon closer inspection I discovered that the landing gear is of an entirely unique classification – the wheels were designed to fall off the aircraft once airborne! This plane was never coming home after it took off, so there was no need for landing gear, fixed or retractable.

What kind of man straps himself into the cockpit of an aircraft, with a very large bomb bolted to the underside, knowing that the wheels required for a return flight will fall off as soon as he is airborne? A patriotic man? A brainwashed man? A crazy man?

I would never describe my friends and family as Kamikazi pilots but the fortitude and selflessness they displayed today put wind under my wings.

If they were here right now, I would buy them all.....

.....a stiff drink of sake.



# Who's Crazy Now?

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Friday March 20 – Day 9

Me: Mornin' Bear

Bear: Good Morning, what time is it?

Me: 6:30

Bear: When did you get up?

Me: 4:30 – I did my workout, wrote some notes, chopped apples...

Bear: Why?

Me: To bake a pie.

Bear: No, why did you get up so early?

Me: To bake a pie.

Bear: You know that's not normal.

Me: Normal is so overrated – coffee?

Bear: Might as well, I'm up now.

Me: Atta Girl! Do you want pie with it?

Bear: You're crazy!



Me: .....

..... Who's crazy now?

# Best Music on Earth

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**Saturday March 21 – Day 10**

One of the great joys of staying at home without much human contact is music. I always enjoy listening but in normal times there are constant interruptions, it is hard to stay infused in the music. Not this week, these aren't *normal* times - I have been tuned into CKUA Radio 24/7.

**We interrupt this broadcast for this important commercial message:**

**If you aren't aware of CKUA radio, you must tune in and give it a try!**

**CKUA is Alberta's oldest radio station and one of the first in Canada. It is listener sponsored so there are no commercials - the programming is 90% music. The DJ's are incomparable professionals, most of them musicians themselves.**

**The station doesn't play any Top 40 tunes (the garbage they repeat on commercial radio). CKUA pulls music from hidden nooks and crannies and features local and emerging artists. CKUA broadcasters do a deep dive into the background of the music and the musicians who perform it.**

**Every hour features a different musical genre; everything from classical to country, bluegrass to reggae - Alternative to Zydeco.**

**Not everybody will enjoy every hour, but CKUA's professionalism stretches each listener's musical scope. I can't carry a tune in a bucket, and everything I learned about Classical music was from *The Bugs Bunny Hour*, but I have been known to tune into *Classic Examples* on Sunday evening while driving my lawnmower around the yard and enjoy every minute.**

**Don't get me started on *Wide Cut Country*, *Friday Night Blues Party* or *Baba's Grooves*, I could ramble on all day.**

**The good news is, you can listen to CKUA anywhere in the world at [www.ckua.com](http://www.ckua.com) or with the CKUA App.**



There, that's my plug for the .....

.....best music on earth!



Before you rush off and tune in, here are some samples from CKUA programming on Day 10 of the Pandemic:

*California Stars* – Billy Bragg and Wilco. Peter David Mulligan dug this tune out of his archives for *Mulligan Stew*. It will resonate with anybody separated from loved ones tonight.

<https://music.apple.com/ca/album/california-stars/515813731?i=515813733>

*Satellite Baby* by Roosevelt Sykes - an old Blues number with Cold War overtones, played by Holger Peterson on *Natch'l Blues*

<https://music.apple.com/ca/album/satellite-baby/1006291545?i=1006293354>

*You're Still on My Mind* – Shaela Miller. I am biased about girls from Lethbridge, but this young lady is talented. This Honky Tonk number got airtime on *Wide Cut Country* this morning.

<https://music.apple.com/ca/album/youre-still-on-my-mind/1395049551?i=1395049569>

*World Gone Wrong* – Bob Dylan. The irony of this choice wasn't lost on Leroy Stagger's audience on *The Dirty Windshield Hour* at noon today.

<https://music.apple.com/ca/album/world-gone-wrong/717158986?i=717159060>

*Feel bad this morning, ain't got no home.*  
*No use in worrying, 'cause the world gone wrong.*  
*I can't be good no more, once like I did before.*  
*I can't be good, baby,*  
*Honey, because the world's gone wrong.*

*World Gone Wrong* - Bob Dylan

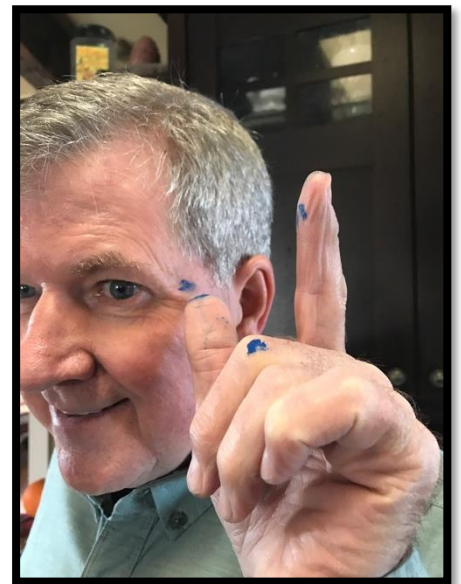
# A Smile Looking Back at You

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Sunday March 22 – Day 11

Me:            (*Coming in from the shop*) Hi  
Bear:          Hi, have you been painting?  
Me:            Yes, why do you ask?  
Bear:          Just a guess.  
Me:            I am running out of paint. I will have to run to Rona when this is over.  
Bear:          You won't need to take a colour sample.  
Me:            What? Why?  
Bear:          Go look in the mirror.

It occurred to me (as I washed the paint off my face with mineral spirits) that anybody cooped up in this pandemic should take a look in the mirror. If they don't have paint, sawdust, flour, snow or some other substance on their face they are less likely to have a smile looking back at them.



To Be Continued.....